

Secular Meta-ethical Principles for the 21st century

By Marcel C. Ernst, March 2013

a) General Characteristics

The principles outlined below are the result of four primary influences:

1. Immanuel Kant's deontological (i.e. duty-based) ethics; according to Kant, the only motive that can lend an act moral value arises from universal principles discovered by reason.¹ His categorical imperative states: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Consequently, the principles are universal and apply to all cultures, countries, societies, communities and individuals. The premise or assumption the principles are based on therefore holds that ethical relativism is fallacious and counterproductive to the formulation of a global ethical perspective. In this regard, Peter Kreeft correctly observed that principles mean moral absolutes and that moral rightness is not a matter of obedience to cultural values.²

2. John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and the body of common law: Rawls distinguished between positive and negative natural duties. Positive duties include upholding justice, mutual aid, and mutual respect; negative duties include not injuring or harming the innocent.³ At the same time, the principles seek to strike a balance between duties and rights.

As in Rawls, the principles are contractual and deontological, rather than utilitarian. But the context provided by situational ethics has also been a factor in the principles' formulation.

3. Critical Theory, and specifically the communicative action advocated by Jürgen Habermas: Challenging the traditional Marxist focus on economics as the determining factor of oppression. Habermas argues that the key to human emancipation is rather to be found in communication, that is, in free moral discourses between individuals and deliberative discourses amongst equal citizens.⁴

4. Environmental ethics – recognizing the central importance of ecological balance to human well-being, the principles incorporate consideration for maintaining biosphere integrity in the 21st century.

The principles aspire to be complementary to all religious inclinations, except when those conflict with basic human rights as proclaimed by the UN's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. But values do play a role, for principles cannot be developed in a vacuum. They must be rooted in the time-honoured legacies of civic communities nurtured by constructive philosophic discourse. Consequently, the principles endeavour to affirm the power of human reasoning, inspiration and compassion, and to defeat the intellectual capitulations of cynicism, nihilism, and extremism.

¹ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *Immanuel Kant: Metaphysics*, Introduction. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantmeta/> Accessed March 4, 2013.

² Peter Kreeft. "A Refutation of Moral Relativism." Text of the Relativism audio lecture at www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05_relativism/relativism_transcription.htm#0. Integritas Institute, February 24, 2003. Accessed February 25, 2013.

³ John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition, 1999.

⁴ Wikipedia Article. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_Communicative_Action. Accessed January 9, 2013.

b) The Principles

1. The right of the weaker outweighs the right of the stronger: The law already recognizes the fact that some members of society deserve special consideration and protection, i.e. children, the elderly, the mobility-impaired. The United Nations Millennium Declaration states

*We recognize that, in addition to our separate responsibilities to our individual societies, we have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world's people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.*⁵

2. Humans must recognize and respect the facts that they are part of the biosphere and dependent upon its continued integrity. Therefore, the principle of minimizing harm applies to animals, plants, water bodies and the atmosphere as well as to humans. Economies, new inventions and technologies should aim to promote the integrity of the biosphere as well as promoting human welfare. The ultimate goal of industry should be reduction and ultimately prevention of pollution, to promote the health of humans and the other species we share the planet with – in other words, sustainable development. The 1987 Brundtland Commission Report defined sustainable development as follows:

*Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*⁶

3. If principle 1 and 2 come into conflict, the needs of vulnerable humans shall prevail over environmental imperatives. However, this applies only to situations where no reasonable compromise is possible. For example, people displaced by civil strife or natural disasters should be given decent shelter as soon as feasible for health reasons, with proper but not undue emphasis on minimizing the environmental impact of the shelter. Proper emphasis would include designing a water treatment system with appropriate technology. Undue emphasis might involve delays pending the receipt of environmentally friendly building materials. All things considered, minimizing the human footprint should always be an important planning and design consideration.

4. In emergency situations saving life (people and sentient animals such as mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish - but not insects) comes before protecting assets. Humans have a duty to help other humans and sentient animals to the best of their ability. Translated to the biosphere, preserving organic matter (such as endangered species) prevails over preserving inorganic matter (such as mineral resources). Finite water and atmospheric resources deserve special consideration. For example, water should not be unduly polluted to save one animal - beached whale, etc.

5. Personal responsibility increases proportionally with the amount of power a person has. Thus, the President of the United States has a greater moral obligation to prevent nuclear war and protect needy individuals and the biosphere than the average citizen. That being said, everyone must assume a share, according to their respective influence, and capacity. All humans should aspire to leave the world a better place than before they were born.

6. Every autonomous individual who has reached the age of majority has the right to change her or his opinion, belief or conviction, without suffering any adverse consequences. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states:

⁵ Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly. 55/2. *United Nations Millennium Declaration*. Values and Principles: 2nd paragraph. <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>. Accessed February 14, 2013.

⁶ 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: *Our Common Future*. Available online at <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>. Accessed March 4, 2013.

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, ... to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*⁷

7. When religious or personal beliefs conflict with the UDHR, the latter shall prevail. The UDHR emphasizes all rights for everyone, including those who do not comply with laws. Article 11 states *Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.* Individuals must accept the social contract of the UDHR, precisely because its high-level 30 articles serve to protect all value systems and/or beliefs around the globe. Failure to do so would violate the UN Charter and affiliated social contract.

8. The 30 Articles of the UDHR shall also prevail over national or regional imperatives. But if a region wants to become autonomous (with a majority in favour), they shall have the right to do so as long as they remain in compliance with UDHR articles. The rights of law-abiding, non-violent minorities remain inviolable and must be respected as much as those of the majority of any country, society, region, or community.

9. Individual humans and organizations must aim to promote a peace ethic, including tolerance towards ethnic and religious minorities, as well as sustainable living. Our children and grand-children deserve better social and natural environments within which they can develop their capacities to the fullest. To this end they should be taught and encouraged to respect the biosphere that sustains us all, and to promote sustainable development.

10. No individual or group shall face persecution or discrimination for promoting these ten principles and seeking to apply them to their lives and to the community around them.

c) What the Principles Are Not

Having explained what the principles are intended to accomplish, it is now necessary to point out what they do not cover and why. Four primary points should be noted:

1. They do not endeavour to superimpose a new belief system. For the most part, the principles merely assist in promoting awareness of what is essential among existing global initiatives. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights figures prominently in this aspect, as does the proclamation of the UN General Secretary at the conclusion of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992:

*Over and above the social contract concluded with men, we must now conclude an ethical and political contract with nature, with this Earth to which we owe our very existence and which gives us life.*⁸

2. However, the principles do not claim that animal life is equal in worth to human life, as some bio-centric and animal rights theorists do. Peter Singer made an interesting case for protecting life based on the capacity for suffering.⁹ But we cannot derive the conclusion from this premise that saving our dog's life is as important as our child's. Tom Regan makes the lifeboat case for throwing the dog overboard, based on the harm principle that the least harm will come from the dog's demise, compared to a

⁷ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Available online at www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml. Accessed in February 2013.

⁸ Quoted in Douglas Roche, Global Conscience.

⁹ Peter Singer, Practical Ethics, 1993, pp. 56-57.

human's.¹⁰ Preferring humans to animals in emergency cases does not mean that a sentient animal's life does not deserve consideration. However, it is not of the same order as a human life.

3. Beyond the admonition to industry to become more sustainable, the principles do not seek to interfere in economic matters. Throughout human history, economic activities have distributed wealth unequally. Favouring the weak over the strong is simply the distinction of a compassionate society. In times of need it is the disadvantaged who are more likely to perish. The strong (physically or economically) can and usually want to look after themselves. Rawls' difference principle applies in this regard – justice as fairness benefits the disadvantaged.

4. They do not advocate the kind of exceptionalism proposed in the original 1987 Brundtland Report. That report advocated that developing countries be exempt from cutting back on emissions and waste until they have reached a higher level of economic development.¹¹ Universality means that all societies, north and south, should chart the path towards sustainable development. China is well on the way to become the world's largest economy, and must make a speedy transition to more sustainable energy paths. In 2013, Population and pollution growth are concentrated in developing countries, while countries in the northern hemisphere have stagnant or declining populations.

Humans and their decision-makers everywhere must recognize that the environment is not externality and that climate change accelerated by unsustainable industries is a major risk to all regions. Effective action on a global scale is possible, as proven by the 1987 Montreal Protocol which banned ozone-destroying CFCs. We all share this small planet for a brief period, until we hand it over to our descendants. Compassion, human rights, sustainable development and peace go hand in hand.

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¹⁰ The Case for Animal Rights, 2004, p. Xxix.

¹¹ Our Common Future.